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What more than Rita can we make of Carver's parts in "Fat"?

Vasiliki Fachard

> [Socrates'] talk most of all resembles the Silenuses that are made to open. If you chose to listen to Socrates' discourses you would feel them at first to be quite ridiculous; on the outside they are clothed with such absurd words and phrases--all, of course, the hide of a mocking satyr. His talk is of pack-asses, smiths, cobblers, and tanners, and he seems always to be using the same terms for the same things; so that anyone inexpert and thoughtless might laugh his speeches to scorn. (*Symposium* 239)
>
> Vie Embryonnaire. C'est la vie essentielle. (Paul Valéry. *Cahiers I* 1132)

Do you have any idea what a cathedral is?

1 Far from the K-marts and shopping malls of his native ground, both in time and space, has the American Carver gone for the sign of his fiction, to no lesser monument than a cathedral, and one which no less a literary figure than Proust aspired to for the representation of his oeuvre when he said: "Voyez, Céleste, je veux que, dans la littérature, mon oeuvre représente une cathédrale" 'You see, Céleste, in literature I would like my work to represent a cathedral' (Albaret 303). How can the embryo of a fiction that appears to aspire to a similar monumentality, then, be anything less than "the fattest person" a waitress has ever seen, with "fingers three times the size of a normal person's fingers," and with the Rabelaisian appetite of the figure contained in "Fat," Carver's first story of a first collection entitled "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?"

2 Yet monumentality of a Proustian kind, usually associated with the novel, is antithetical to a fiction whose writer "*[chose]* to write short stories and poems" (*Fires* 27) and admitted that he had "a hard time writing a novel, given [his] anxious inability to focus on anything for a sustained period of time" (*Fires* 25-26). Sustained breath, or *souffle*, such as characterizes the oeuvre of Balzac is also dealt a blow in an eponymic poem by Carver depicting that living monument as "flinging open his gown [and] train[ing] a great stream of piss into the early nineteenth century chamberpot" (*Fires* 75),[1] which, we presume, now needs emptying. Nor is any nineteenth-century colossus towering above his peers the paradigm of the self-effacing narrator in "Cathedral" who sees himself as a mere *ouvrier,* or worker, and his craft the result of persistence at work alone: "I'm no artist but I kept drawing just the same."

3 Above all however, a European cathedral is discrepant in the American landscape, where high-rises are a truer emblem of a monumentality whose thrust is void of a spirituality it relegates to the "more house-like Protestant church" (Bakhtin 397). If its appropriation seems legitimate in the European Proust, for whom cathedrals were also "the highest and most original expression of the genius of France" (*Contre Sainte-Beuve* 142), its dissonance in the American "netherland of workplace, home, and shopping centers" (Shute 3) could hardly have escaped Carver any more than it did his narrator in "Cathedral" when he suddenly wonders if blue-collar Americans like himself and the blind man even know "what a cathedral is":

> Then something occurred to me and I said, 'Something has occurred to me. Do you have any idea what a cathedral is?... If somebody says cathedral to you, do you have any notion what they're talking about? Do you know the difference between that and a Baptist church, say?'

4 Foreign to the American space, a cathedral is also incongruous to it through the different notion of time it evokes and also demands for its execution. Carver's insistence on the "glimpse" (*Fires* 17) or his imperative "Get in, get out. Don't linger" (*Fires* 13) are both incompatible with a monument that took generations to build:

> '[Cathedrals] took hundreds of workers fifty or a hundred years to build... Generations of the same families worked on a cathedral... The men who began their life's work on them, they never lived to see the completion of their work. In that wise bub,' [the blind man] continues, 'they're no different from the rest of us, right?'

5 According to the above, Carver's cathedral cannot be of a Proustian kind if one artist cannot be he who began as well as he who put the finishing touches on his own work. Such a literary monolith would sever rather than draw the reader to the process which--the blind man's equivocal use of the plural pronoun suggests--this double writer (narrator and blind man) offers to share with "the rest of us." If the ultimate icon of a cathedral and glimpse of spirituality the above narrator achieves through it will have the power to ultimately bless by giving meaning to the existential quest embodied in the three collections leading to the concluding story of its title, the making of cathedrals drew Carver just as forcefully to the medieval artisan's rather than Balzac's manner of execution. More in keeping with the medieval emphasis on craftsmanship rather than romantic inspiration as well as with the unwavering faith that the finished monument is the product of generations rather than of one artist is Carver's own notion of work as being an open "process more than a fixed position":

> I like to mess around with my stories. I'd rather tinker with a story after writing it, and then tinker some more, changing this, changing that, than have to write the

> story in the first place . . . Maybe I revise because it gradually takes me into the heart of what the story is *about*. I have to keep trying to see if I can find that out. It's a process more than a fixed position. (*Fires* 218)[2]

6 Discarding the notion of the omniscient author, the above also compels us to relegate the exegetic function of a critic to Balzac's "chamberpot" as well, since he can no longer presume to explain that which escapes the writer himself. The pulverization of a unitary and fixed message so as to encrypt it in its process makes Carver's fiction resistant to critics who, according to Tess Gallagher, persist in trying to "subdue" it through words alone:

> I have watched the critics since Raymond Carver's death try to subdue his work with smart-sounding phrases--'minimalist,' 'dirty realist,' 'hick chic,' 'white trash fiction,' 'freeze-dried fiction'--as if these terms could confine and characterize his style and content. Yet the work itself continues to reject all such labels. Its mystery remains intact. (106)

7 The inconclusive nature of Carver's work demands that the reader be brought into the writer's elucidating process, "obliged into its execution" as says Valéry: "Il faut obliger [le] lecteur à *l'exécution*" (*Cahiers II* 1165). A dynamic contact with its "relentless motion" (*Fires* 17) strips the reader of his panoply of "abstract and rhetorical" (*No Heroics* 121) language with which he once came to "subdue" the work and forces him to elucidate as hebonds with that which clings in the hypo-mimetic regions of a story: the discontinuous parts of a fractured textuality waiting for readers to give them unity--or unities--of a spatial kind and one that may be unfathomed by the writer himself. The result will be another "tapestry of relationship and event" (*No Heroics* 158) than the writer's, a spatiality achieved through connections--so infinite in their combinatory possibilities that they make the reader's "head ache" as much as they do that of the narrator in "So Much Water so Close to Home": "There is a connection to be made of these things, these events, these faces, if I can find it. My head aches with the effort to find it."

8 No less a phenomenon than textuality itself, ensomatised in the Botero-like figure that a waitress serves in "Fat," offers itself in such fragmented form rather than in any monolithic wholeness--a quality appropriated from the building "process" of cathedrals rather than from their "fixed position" in the European soil.

Now that's part of it. I think that is really part of it.

9 In its uttermost mimetic simplicity, "Fat" is the story of an obese customer a waitress has served one day in a restaurant and whose uncanny impact she is trying to tell her friend Rita about. If "repetition is in itself a sign" (Riffaterre 49), however, her insistence on "tell" in the opening lines of the story signals that "Fat" may also be about "telling" itself, or narrative process as well:

> I'm sitting over coffee and cigarets at my friend Rita's and I am *telling* her about it. Here is what I *tell* her. (emphasis added)

10 As artless and guileless as the two lines which begin a story and a collection sound, the dent they suggest between the telling of an event and the narration of it will make terrific demands on a narrator who must be anything but artless in order to see them to their resolution in and through the body of her story.

11 Similar demands will be made on the reader who, consequently, becomes as fractured as the story itself. For only part of it--the straightforward part--is told to Rita, the actual

listener/reader whose function is designated through a slight slurring of her name. Unnamed yet far from un-solicited is the other, implied reader who is let in on the story to Rita by a conniving narrator who allows her to eavesdrop on what she tells her named friend. While undergoing halving, therefore, the (whole) reader can simultaneously reconstitute his own wholeness only by doing a "bi-linear deciphering" (Riffaterre 5) of Rita's story along with the much fatter one that pays heed to the collection's title and leaves things unsaid. Only a double reader, consequently, can give wholeness to the story through the first connection he is asked to make of its two parts: mimetic and submimetic, voiced and silenced. Most likely the above has been intuited by the narrator when she says, "Now that's part of it. I think that is really part of it," and even insists on the fissured quality of her story when she later warns Rudy, her husband, about its inconclusiveness:

> Rudy, he is fat, I say, but that is not the whole story. Rudy just laughs.

12 The significance of Rudy's laugh could go undetected were it not for its repetition later at the couple's home rather than at their common workplace and just before he prepares to tell his version of not one but "two fat guys"--which already hints at a doubling of her story. The act of connecting, moreover, the two chronotopically disjointed sentences ("Rudy just laughs" and the subsequent "he just laughs") prods the reader to a further connection between Rudy and similar laughing figures who intimate things which they refrain from verbalizing in other stories by Carver.[3] If, in contrast to those figures, Rudy willverbalize or tell a story in "Fat," it will nevertheless not be until after the wife has finished hers to Rita and admitted her failure to articulate what she was really after: "I know now I was after something. But I don't know what." The fact that Rudy seems in no hurry or expresses no desire to have it talked out as she does, however, does not signify that he is not also nurturing a rudi-ment or embryo of a story himself. The strain of witholding what his loquacious wife tries to articulatemakes him burst into the laugh that tells us that somewhere between the "diaphragm, the nerves, and ideas" (Valéry *Cahiers I* 605-6) is his story now, gestating in silence. What that muffled story demands of him for the time being is best served by the function of a collector[4] of material he will put into words later: bits and pieces from what the narrator/wife but also his other co-workers tell him about the fat man as well as what he himself observes from the kitchen of the restaurant where they both work--she serving and he actually preparing parts of the fat man's food. Hers for now, his laughter tells us, the indulgence of telling the story of presence. A presence so urgent as to obliterate all quotation marks in her story, displacing them through the plethora of "he says, I say, she says" that saturate her text. His the satisfaction of sustaining the mute parts of his story for later. And ours the suspicion throughout the wife's telling that the discourse of the body as the signifier to which she is so uncannily drawn may not be whole without adding his story to hers, thus doubling it in time and space. In the rudi-mentary syntactic sequence he will give to her parts, Rudy's story will constitute the second panel of a narrative diptych in which he will finally harness, verbally, the forces that were overwhelming his wife in the first panel. In the process of thus splitting a story and a reader, the narrator in his/her double process of mutism and self-expression has not been spared division either.[5]

May I serve you? I say.

13 If intuitively, therefore, the wife has turned for a brief instant to the husband for the story's ultimate completion, it is nonetheless the fat man that she feels a compulsive need to "serve" for the whole duration of her story now:

> Good evening, I say. May I *serve* you? I say.
> Good evening, he says. Hello. Yes, he says. I think we're ready to *order* now, he says.
> (emphasis added)

14 Used intransitively, "serve" is ungrammatical in the standard formula which, far from servility, expects a waitress to merely ask if a customer is 'ready to order.' In that sense, the fat man's use of "order" in his answer can appear as an attempt to correct that ungrammaticality. For us, however, the above discrepancy signals the polysemic quality of a word that coheres more with a ceremony or rite (of initiation) in which the waitress first serves a narrative function. If she and the fat man have no name, furthermore, it is because they both are functions of textuality rather than Balzacian characters of nineteenth-century fiction. Above all, the ungrammaticality serves to loosen the word from the mimetic context of a restaurant alone so that it may bond more freely with "order," its opposite. In the couplet formed by her question and his *réplique*, "serve" and "order" have thus collided to form a binarity which will be fundamental in a story that will question the old "order" of narrative things and supplant demands of nineteenth-century realism with new imperatives of writing. At the core of the change is the questioning of the language of a fiction which, as reduced to its textuality as modern painting is to the two-dimensionality of its canvas, no longer submits to the mimetic order alone but begs to be heard in its multi-functionality, in its paradigmatic fatness and evocative power, by a new kind of reader. It is such fatness as textual space rather than actual mimetic "fat" that the waitress would like to appropriate when she puts herself in the service of the fat man and admits to him that she would like "to gain": "Me, I eat and I eat and I can't gain, I say. I'd like to gain, I say."

15 Her desire to gain, however, threatens to uncouple her from Rudy, the equally thin husband to whom she will later serve only tea, for his body is the narrative one of the diegetic order she no longer wishes to adhere to but distance herself from. More commanding to her appears the fat paradigm which up to now had done no ordering but submitted to dictates of message, meaning, conclusiveness. Threatened by the wife's attraction to new demands for a fatter, more potent narrative in which the primary function of language is to suggest rather than to say, the hegemonic Rudy will attempt to subdue her "against [her] will" later in bed, yet will never gain the command over her that the fat man has--the new master she serves of her own will.

16 Only appropriate, therefore, would seem a "royal 'we' " (Saltzman 24) for such a master that compels her to serve unconditionally even before he has ordered anything. Appropriate, that is, if we ignore rather than connect the plural pronoun to the fat man's later enigmatic response to the waitress's wish to gain: "No, he says. If we had our choice, no. 'But there is no choice'" (emphasis added). As an admission of impotence the above denies any connotation of power and regal stature to a grotesquely fat figure. In expressing that impotence through an absence of "choice," however, a more insidious process is at work to actually deprive the fat man of something altogether: the status of "character" in the Aristotelian definition of one whose "dialogue or... actions reveal some

choice" (*Poetics* 55). Reduced to a mere function is a man she may serve in her double function as waitress and narrator but who also serves her need to embody her fat textual matter, the hypo-mimetic narrative parts or "multiplicity of subjects, voices, and views of the world" that constitute a "manifold text" rather than "the oneness of a thinking 'I'" (Calvino *Six Memos* 117). It is the above multiplicity of embryonic voices of a fiction to come that the corporeality of the fat man contains and is trying to tell us about through his oxymoric use of the plural pronoun throughout the entire story--"strange" even for the narrator, who obliquely asks us for its elucidation when she says:

> He has this way of speaking--strange, *don't you know*. And he makes a little puffing sound every so often. (emphasis added)

17 No mimetic excess of flesh can hide for us what his use of "we" reveals: a body fissured and broken into so many parts that he is huffing and "puffing" with the effort to contain them within a mimetically thin story. Consequently, his "puffing sound" is no more "strange" to us than his "we," for how else can a fat man breathe when as sign of that textuality he is over-exerting himself to signify in a multitude of binary directions and according to the dictates of a body of unruly parts inside her which are subversive of any hierarchy other than that which would make of "Fat" the *arche* of a fiction. What "choice" finally do the parts have other than what the narrator and reader "make" of them and that Rita, the narrator realizes at the end of her story, cannot: "That's a funny story, Rita says, but I can see she doesn't know what to make of it."

18 If the "we" of "the fattest person," therefore, punctures the mimetic membrane of "a thinking 'I'," his "puffing sound" tears it no less as it points simultaneously away from a "person" and in the direction of a dynamo, an engine, or generator for the energy required by the nascent narrative process. The engine is still rudimentary if we agree with Paul Valéry that "Les bonnes machines ne font pas de bruit", 'Good machines make no noise' (*Cahiers II* 941). Only when the narrative parts of the machine begin to fall "into place," as the cars of a train will do in "The Compartment" and later in "The Train," will the annoying "puffing sound" become anything like a "breath of air on the paper" ("Fever") and eventually even synonymous with the word "soul."[6]

19 An apprentice writer, therefore, learning her mechanics of fiction is the narrator as she attempts to give unity to the parts she has projected onto the fat man, and a close kin to Carver, who also admitted at approximately the same time as the writing of *Will You Please* that he was learning his: "It was during this long period... that I was trying to learn my craft as a writer, how to be as subtle as a river current when very little else in my life was subtle" (*No Heroics* 126). A "speaking person" (Bakhtin 331) for her own fractured textuality in its multiple rather than "unitary language" (Bakhtin 366) has subdued an apprentice narrator and not merely a waitress, exercising an uncanny command over her that will become manifest in the act of serving a meal.

I think we will begin with a Caesar salad, he says.

20 In its allegorical function of representing narrative process in its parts, the meal which the waitress will serve the fat man also comes in parts, or courses. To mark her initiation to his imperial service through the ritual of the meal, what else but a "Caesar salad" can the waitress serve (or the man order) as first course, hors d'oeuvre, or starter of its process:

> I think we will begin with a Caesar salad, he says. And then a bowl of soup with some extra bread and butter. The lamb chops, I believe, he says. And baked potato with sour cream. We'll see about dessert later.

21 Albeit broken and multiple, the fat man's obesity remains a sign of potency, for undeniably erotic is the attraction the waitress feels for her customer throughout her service. Not all courses, however, arouse her equally, or demand from her the same energy when being served. While some bring out in her a Maenad serving a Dionysiac figure, others leave her aloof and unresponsive. Understandably in a first story of a first collection, it is the first course or starter which gets her so "keyed up or something that [she] knock[s] over his glass of water":

> I make the Caesar salad there at his table, him watching my every move, meanwhile buttering pieces of bread and laying them off to one side, all the time making this puffing noise. Anyway, I am so keyed up or something, I knock over his glass of water.
> I'm so sorry, I say. It always happens when you get into a hurry. I'm very sorry, I say. Are you all right? I say. I'll get the boy to clean up right away, I say.

22 Mimetically excessive is the waitress's fuss about the spilling of a mere glass of water and exaggerated her concern whether the man is "all right" not to point to accidents of a different sort, such as occur when the forces of textuality cannot be harnessed and end up 'flooding' the starting process. The "boy" she will "get... to clean up right away" (Does water soil or stain anything?) is the same "Leander" who had earlier "poured the fat man's water" and had connected through that function with a waitress who is forever replenishing the fat man's basket with "bread and butter." Having thus coupled in providing the two most basic nutrients (bread and water), the bus boy and waitress point to a mythological couple as well, one which the name of Leander--so discordant in a workplace where Bud, Bob, and Earl are the Carverian norm--obliges the reader to complete: *Hero and Leander*.

23 Water as the element of textuality is suggested throughout Carver's work, as titles such as *Ultramarine* and *A New Path To the Waterfall* show. It is in the story "So Much Water so Close to Home," however, that the corpse of a drowned girl found in the river by the men who had gone fishing there can also serve as a narrative body whose narrator could not "keep... from drifting away." In the apprenticeship of his own craft, the Carver who was "trying to... be as subtle as a river current" knew that some narratives even drown in those currents. By evoking his mythological counterpart, the one who had once saved Hero from the tides of the Hellespont, Leander reminds us of a similar menace lurking in every process whose forces remain unbridled too long. Most formidable among them is the element of time, no longer a linear dimension in which a story unfolds in uniformity and which contains it but an ingredient of its process and, therefore, one that also needs to be harnessed--as the narrator must learn: "It always happens when you get into a hurry."

24 By giving the reader half of the dyad, Carver has managed to bring him into the execution of the significant act of naming the other half: Hero-ine of the textual process in which the waitress is serving but in which she is not free from the menace of drowning in the very forces she is trying to order, for they will resist containment of any sort, especially in a mere "glass."

Enjoy your dinner, I say.

25 Following an appetizer of such size, the reader's expectations of the main course of the meal have naturally been raised. In vain, however, for not only are the un-named and un-commented "chops and baked potato" served without any fuss or agitation, but the meat is ignored altogether by a waitress who fiddles with the potato alone:

> I drop lots of sour cream onto his potato. I sprinkle bacon and chives over his sour cream. I bring him more bread and butter.

26 At what should be the climax of the normal sequence of courses, all but climactic is the mini-pyramid she makes on the potato, indulging the fat man's appetite for starch and caloric content rather than meat, or what would correspond to more substantial textual fiber. Having been prepared by Rudy in the kitchen rather than by her "there at his table," as was the Caesar salad, the meat leaves her unsolicited and in anticipation of the next course. She may thus perfunctorily be saying "Enjoy your dinner" as she serves it. In reality, her almost simultaneous gesture of "rais[ing] the lid of his sugar bowl"--an object which, unlike a bottle of ketchup or Worcester sauce, is disconnected from the meat--is saying something else to the fat man:

> Enjoy your dinner, I say. I raise the lid of his sugar bowl and look in. He nods and keeps looking at me until I move away.
> I know now I was after something. But I don't know what.

27 If she does not, the man who has raised the Pandoran "lid" must "know" or intimate something about the "Special" treatment that will come with the "Green Lantern Special" dessert, and is nodding in consent to the sweet course which connects with the "sugar" under the "l-id." Its significance is heightened when she decides to "go off to the kitchen to see after" it herself. As we may expect, it is also this course that will have Rudy feigning jealousy through a humor that may be masking a "truth that has not said its last word" (Lacan 60):

> Sounds to me she's sweet on fat stuff, he says.
> Better watch out, Rudy, says Joanne, who just that minute comes into the kitchen.
> I'm getting jealous, Rudy says to Joanne.

28 When the waitress will finally "put the Special in front of the fat man along with a big bowl of vanilla ice cream with chocolate syrup to the side," she will be overcome with a vague and unarticulated "feeling":

> Thank you, he says.
> You are very welcome, I say--and a feeling comes over me.
> Believe it or not, he says, we have not always eaten like this.

29 The "feeling" will connect with the intuition she will have in the last line of the story: "My life is going to change, I feel it." As "speaking person" for a new fiction and the changes it will bring, what the obese man--who has certainly eaten such a copious meal before--is also saying in the above is: "We have not always [written] like this."

30 Parts of a meal, therefore, and not words, have done the talking in a collection entitled *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and of which "Fat" is its mere appetizer, but, as Americans know, an appetizer of such size as to constitute a meal in itself: "You know the size of those Caesar salads?" the waitress tells Rita. In the process of serving the meal, the waitress and her fat man subverted the old "order" of its parts not in the chronological sequence of the courses but spatially, by "puffing" up the significance of some while

spurning others. Almost all the fuss and energy on her part were reserved for the first course, while her indulgence of the fat man's ultimate craving was told by the dessert. Being Carver's first story of a first collection, "Fat" has not yet acquired a body other than one that tells us of its rudimentary beginnings. By capitalising the first and the last courses, the only two she actively prepared herself, "Fat" is saying that the *arche* may also be the *telos* in this story, while the energy in both, nothing less than erotic.

What else?... This story's getting interesting now.

31 The waitress's language having been the meal itself, "what else" can she possibly tell Rita after that rite has ended and the fat man's appetite been satisfied? Yet for Rita, her friend is stopping in the middle of a story that needs to be brought to its resolution:

> What else? Rita says...This story's getting interesting now, Rita says.
> That's it. Nothing else. He eats his desserts, and then he leaves and then we go home, Rudy and me.

32 Unfortunately, no indication has Rita from her friend's categorical answer that the story may continue, no sign such as we have from Rudy who, in the line immediately following, tells us that he, and not only the wife, uncannily also connects with a customer whose picture still lingers in his mind:

> *Some fatty*, Rudy says, *stretching* like he does when he's tired. Then *he just laughs* and goes back to watching the TV. (emphasis added)

33 Rudy's unexpected anamnesis verbalized in "some fatty" has 'brought the fat man home,' and provided the first stitch that will connect the second part of the story to the first. If laughter, furthermore, can also signal an "awakening,"[7] the above reminds us that whatever Rudy was ruminating throughout the first part, with which his laughter now connects, is also about to awaken to utterance little after he has finished "stretching" in time in order to re-collect it all in his memory. Most likely the verbalized end of a longer, unarticulated thought still being witheld by Rudy, "some fatty" also confirms our suspicion that the husband was not blind to the dallying of sorts that went on between the fat man and his wife in the restaurant and may "just laugh" to reassure himself that he can handle the menace of the forces his rival has unleashed in her. For there is little doubt in our mind that the fat man is a rival when we see what the wife intuits growing inside her body in the lines immediately following the above:

> I put the water on to boil for tea and take a shower. I put my hand on my middle and wonder what would happen if I had children and one of them turned out to look like that, *so fat* (emphasis added).

34 There can be little doubt, in other words, in the mind of the reader who has been connecting the erotic signals exchanged between the waitress and the customer she has just left, that now a narrator is "intuiting the advent of pregnancy" (Nesset 300),[8] for conception of the fat foetus she intimates inside her could only have been of a narrative kind as all the serving was done "there at his table" and not on the "bed" which will soon serve to satisfy Rudy's different needs.

35 Not surprisingly for a story where bodies and their functioning are metaphors for narrative bodies as well, the moment she puts her hand on her (body's) "middle" also coincides with the middle of a story about to divide into two panels, each dominated by one of the two men whom the waitress/wife serves in two different places: a restaurant

and a home. The objects structuring the signifying activity respectively in each are a table and a bed. Food--or its absence--will once again polarize the two spaces before fusing them into a "terrifically" double embryo of a story. This is the function of the contrast between the abundance of courses the waitress once served the fat man and what she has in store for the husband now. For unlike the sensual pleasure offered to the former through a meal of oversize appetizers and desserts, no meal whatsoever, no snack, and no sweet awaits Rudy at home but "tea," a non-food by most American standards:[9]

> I pour the water in the pot, arrange the cups, the sugar bowl, carton of half and half, and take the tray in to Rudy.

36 Deprived of its living substances through boiling and contained in a "pot" from which it is never knocked over, there is little risk now that the water used for the husband's tea will get her as "keyed up" or aroused as the fat man's glass of water once had. The lid of the sugar bowl with the promise of favors it contained for him is now also kept closed. The "carton of half and half," or cream whose fat or erotic content has been reduced (cut in half, like so much in Carver), is a meager substitute for the more sensual "vanilla ice cream" that the wife had added to the fat man's already "Special" dessert. Finally, the "tray" itself is a much diminished version of the table at the waitress's station. With such service and nourishment, one can only conclude that the wife is trying to curb rather than stimulate or indulge the husband's appetite.

I can't think of anything to say.

37 If food is the language through which the waitress serves narrative demands within her by merely projecting them first on a fat man and now on one whose appetite is so reduced as to define him as anorexic, the tea she serves the husband is saying something about a narrative function he may also have in the story as well as what she thinks of that function: all ceremony and no content. Judging from what he has been fed, Rudy's function cannnot be to ensomatise paradigmatic fatness, the suggestiveness of words, or hypo-mimetic process but to finally find "the minimum number of words" (*Fires* 29) in which to articulate that fatness. This he proceeds to do in the story he will tell immediately following the "tea" she fed him for the accomplishment of what we recognize to be his mimetic function:

> As if he's been thinking about it, Rudy says, I knew a fat guy once, a couple of fat guys, really fat guys, when I was a kid. They were tubbies, my God. I don't remember their names. Fat, that's the only name this one kid had. We called him Fat, the kid who lived next door to me. He was a neighbor. The other kid came along later. His name was Wobbly. Everybody called him Wobbly except the teachers. Wobbly and Fat. Wish I had their pictures, Rudy says.

38 Eclipsed though he may be by a wife who has done all the "telling" in "Fat," the above shows that Rudy also has a narrative function in this story--so rudi-mentary as to earn him his name. So reduced is it, in fact, that it risks to go unnoticed by the reader, who may not immediately have anything more to say about it than his wife, whose only comment at the end is: "I can't think of anything to say."Clearly, the wife is not acknowledging Rudy's story now any more than she acknowledged his appetite earlier. Did she not have a lot--even "too much"--to say to Rita, in her attempt to understand the fat man's impact? Her comment contrasts sharply with the volubility the fat man aroused in her and points to Rudy's inadequacy to achieve as much.

As if he's been thinking about it...

39 Can a narrator, however, whose story never lost "contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present" (Bakhtin 27) which the fat man embodies and whose narrative is consequently told exclusively in the present be expected to have the distance needed to acknowledge a story which, unlike her own, is told entirely in the past tense--the only instance of its use in the whole story? The "temporal division," or the "thought-shaping power of 'earlier' or 'later'" (Bakhtin 158) which the past tense allows, is what enables Rudy to begin to distance his story from their common fat matter, as she had once oscillated away from their common diegetic order by expressing a wish to "gain." Although "stretching" in time away from the inconclusiveness of the wife's present, Rudy's story shows, nevertheless, more connections with hers than first meet the eye, making the reader say what she could not, in a retroactive reading of his story as follows:

40 *"As if he's been thinking about it..."* Rudy "thinking about it" contrasts with the waitress "telling her about it" in the first line of the story. Far from indulging in self-expression, Rudy has taken the time to think before telling his story, a process which implies the doubling we see in the line immediately following.

41 *"I knew a fat guy once, a couple of fat guys..."* The reader has already wondered if the second half of the story would have existed had Rudy not persisted in "thinking about it," as he does after they go home. In doing so, he has doubled the story: adding his articulated version to the one where things were being intuited by her in their pre-articulate stage; to the one that was being talked out, that which subsists in the depths of a 'husband' who laughs while waiting for his story's time to come. One narrator needs to annex the narrative space of the whole story in order to tell "it" in the *hic et nunc*--both stories, we recall, are narrated by the wife. In contrast, Rudy's spatial needs for the few lines of his story withinhers are so reduced as to be "hardly there at all," as the wife will tell us when describing his body in their act of coupling later. Yet Rudy compensates for the reduction in space through his greater use and domination of the ingredient of time. Functioning both in the present (as his laugh signaled) and in the past (through a recollection or memory), Rudy is able to stretch or extend out of her story in order to temporally encompass the whole. Thus, while Rudy's (thin) story is contained within his wife's (fat) story to Rita, her (fat) story is simultaneously also contained in Rudy's (thin) verbalised version of an impact she cannot articulate to her friend. Containing and contained, both narrative parts, and not only hers, are "tubbies," as the next line says.

42 *"They were tubbies, my God."* The word also reminds us of Harriet's derisive remark about the fat man when she had said, "How's old tub-of-guts doing?"

43 *"I don't remember their names. Fat, that's the only name this one kid had."* If Rudy's story has come a long way toward affirming him as a narrator, this line may be outdoing the wife in so far as it shows Rudy's thin but straightforward story as containing "Fat," the title of the whole story. Used as substantive rather than the epithet for a [fat] man the wife is too busy serving to distance herself from, Rudy gives a name to a process he recognizes as being also about the substance, matter, phenomenological "it" from which he and she will draw the parts of their two stories. Consistent with his function of naming, furthermore, is the fact that Rudy himself has a name in the story. More gaping thus becomes the

lacuna of one for her--as well as more insistent for the reader the itch to decrypt the name of Hero.

44 *"We called him Fat, the kid who lived next door to me. He was a neighbor."* In the narrative diptych that the story of two men served by the same waitress/wife constitutes, Rudy is also "next door" to the fat man, his rival but also his close "neighbor."

45 *"The other kid came along later. His name was Wobbly."* Rudy knows that out of the fat body of psycho-narrative parts which both he and his other half contain will come the second "fat guy" or the actual story of "Fat"--as "wobbly" as any first story making its first steps and trying to stand on its own two feet. Being double, the story is also "wobbly" because both the wife's distended narrative about the impact of a fat man and Rudy's thin but coherent story are incomplete in themselves. One part of what is ultimately the same writer submits to the pull and titillation of a fat body of narrative forces in their pre-verbal state while the part which finds a voice in Rudy must harness those unbridled parts into a straightforward story whose message may ultimately be transmitted even to humble readers like Rita. "Fat," however, has not found its balance between the two axes and is made "wobbly" by the unequal attraction the two men exercise on the waitress/wife: drawn to one who is obese and unwieldy, oblivious to another, who is so thin that he is "hardly there at all" yet must verbally carry the "whole." Rudy's co-worker, Joanne, may have been intimating something of the challenge and difficulty of his vehicular function when she warned him with a phrase smacking of the well-known Christmas tune: "Better watch out, Rudy."

46 *"Everybody called him Wobbly except the teachers."* If meant to be disparaging, the above can be directed at "teachers" or theorists of fiction who must subdue a story with their words, make it "say" something even when it does not, forcing a text to deliver a message or meaning which are simply not yet in this "wobbly" *infans* of a first story which makes no pretensions to hide the awkwardness and imbalance of its rudimentary beginnings.

47 On the other hand, teachers can also be like John Gardner, who "kept drumming" at Carver "the importance of using... common language, the language of normal discourse, the language we speak to each other in" (*Fires* 28). It was Gardner who also taught him to use "the minimum number of words" and to choose them for their "ramifications" rather than for their "pseudo-poetic" (*Fires* 29) effect. Meeting, as it does, the above demands, "Fat" would then not seem "wobbly" to such teachers or theorists who know that this first story has managed to find the right words in order to "say" and "tell about" its own "wobbly" and teratological doubleness. Like all else in Carver, teachers too can be of two kinds.

48 "*I wish I had their pictures.*" "You must examine if my language makes sense; for I too, like Simmias, naturally need an image," says Socrates in the *Phaedo* (87B3). Is it Rudy, rather than his female counterpart, we wonder, who knows that "names which are rightly given are like the things named and are images of them" (*Cratylus* 439A)? Could it be Rudy who will go after that "picture" in "Cathedral" that will be essential in the "visual and emotional support, structuration of [this wobbly] text" now (Verley 50)?

49 If so, he must begin to draw the wife (the female writer in him) away from the attraction of her fat master. The forces he embodies and which are felt by her as the obssessive picture of a "fat man," must be vanquished.[10] Yet, to replace one picture with another in order to subvert the order in which the Maenad-like waitress serves her Silenus is no easy task. Rudy's syntactically simple narrative in its rectilinear progression may draw the

equally rudimentary reader that is Rita to his story, but will not yet cure the narrator in his wife from a compulsion to serve the needs of the "fattest person [she has] ever seen" and to the quasi-exclusion of any mimetic demands for a clear picture of things.[11] The wife will reject Rudy's wish for an iconic representation of their common textual matter in favor of a continual process in which unharnessed, psycho-narrative parts spilling and colliding unexpectedly induce in her an eroticised and fecund state from which Rudy, in his attempt to put the "lid" back on process, is as textually dis-connected as he will soon be from her favors in bed, the place where he will now begin to force her to acknowledge his function:

> I can't think of anything to say, so we drink our tea and pretty soon I get up to go to bed. Rudy gets up too, turns off the TV, locks the front door, and *begins* his unbuttoning. (emphasis added)

50 The implacable linearity of Rudy's sequence of acts--"Rudy gets up.../turns off the TV/ locks the door/and begins his unbuttoning"--is that of the syntagm itself aiming to impose its order on the fat paradigm the wife had served freely (albeit in a servile manner) in the more open space of a restaurant. By locking the door before beginning to undress, Rudy is clearly confining the wife within his territory. The above act of a hgemwn (hegemon) contrasts with the one of the benevolent arcwn (archon) who commanded the waitress's submission without any tactics of force. Yet, he too had begun a process when he had said: "I think we will begin with a Caesar salad." The process Rudy begins, however, is felt by the wife as a violation of her space as it gradually diminishes from a house whose front door has been locked, to the bedroom, and finally to the "edge of the bed" where she ultimately retreats:

> I get into bed and move clear over to the edge and lie there on my stomach. But right away, as soon as he turns off the light and gets into bed, Rudy *begins*. I turn on my back and relax some, though it is against my will. But here is the thing. When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. *I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all.* (emphasis added)

51 Uncannily, an act that was clearly seen as violation of her preferred paradigmatic space culminates in a "terrifically fat" sensation which is as oxymoric in a diet-conscious society as her former desire to "gain." Whereas she expected to gain in the fat man's order, moreover, it is in Rudy's order that she actually doubled. Although she once resisted Rudy, her discrepant phrase tells us that she is now exulting in the ultimate bonding, or coupling of the two beginnings of stories that have come together to create a new embryo of a fat story. "Terrifically fat" thus ceases to constitute a semantic dissonance when applied to a narrative body that has, through Rudy's hegemonic imposition of his "lust" (Runyon 12) upon her body, achieved the fusion of both his story and hers, forcing her to recognize his function as well as her own, for both are indispensable in creating the necessary "tension in a piece of fiction" according to Carver:

> What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things. (*Fires* 17)

52 "So fat," we may recall, did she intuit the narrative foetus to have been earlier when she put her hand on her middle following a multi-course meal to the fat man. "Terrifically fat" are the first, powerful stirrings inside her now, in the second part of the story, and, paradoxically, following inter-course with Rudy. Five stories later, the present 'foetus' will become the "baby" whose "arm [is] so fat!" in "The Father." If the wife in "Fat"

persists in recognizing only the fat man as the father of the "terrifically fat" embryo rather than the one who "gets on" her, we, the readers who must recognize the chronotopic claims of both narrators, know that impregnation of the wife could not have taken place without Rudy. Having had no access to the waitress in bed, but only at a (writing) table, the fat man's inseminating substance (what really spilled when she knocked his glass of water) had to be poured into a mimetic vessel, or "pot," that will contain and eventually vehicleit into the right words. Such seed[12] was most probably what the fat man's phallic fingers contained if they were the part of the body which, more than any other, first drew the waitress's attention:

> Everything about him is big. But it is the fingers I remember best. When I stop at the table near his to see to the old couple, I first notice the fingers. They look three times the size of a normal person's fingers--long, thick, creamy fingers.

53 "Fat" is the story of what was contained in those writing fingers, the spilling of their inseminating agents, the beginning(s) of a process that is double: inseminating and vehicular. The recognition of the narrative space needed for both--the fighting it out in the time-space of the story--constitutes the double process of "Fat." The erotic attraction to the territory where things are intimated rather than verbalized blinds the female narrator to Rudy's demand for a thin line of space he also needs for their utterance. Our recognition of the above duality, however, obliges us to grant paternity status to both men as it also compels their off-spring or "issue" to be... 'ha(l)ved'--a menace that hangs over the (narrative) baby in the story "Popular Mechanics" when the quarrelling parents are each pulling it in opposite directions as the story comes to its conclusion:

> She would *have* it this baby. She grabbed for the baby's other arm. She caught the baby around the wrist and leaned back.
> But he would not let go. He felt the baby slipping out of his hands and he pulled back very hard.
> In this manner, *the issue was decided.* (emphasis added)

Waiting for what? I'd like to know.

54 Only "funny" can a double story of two narrators, anorexic and bulimic, be for a conventional reader like Rita, who does not understand the writer's new demands on her to "make" something of the two halves, connect the two panels of a diptych containing both "process" and "a fixed position," space for one, time for the other: "That's a funny story, Rita says, but I can see she doesn't know what to make of it." Having understood nothing of the creative `poiein` (making) which her friend has solicited her to participate in, Rita can only wait for a resolution in vain:

> [Rita] sits there waiting, her dainty fingers poking her hair.
> *"Waiting for what?* I'd like to know."
> It is August.
> My life is going to change. I feel it.

55 (Pokey) Rita's passive and empty "waiting" naturally irritates her friend, and her italicized question shows it. If meant to be an answer of sorts, however, the line immediately following her question ("It is August") constitutes another mimetic dent on "the visible action of the story," and one that will further confound Rita, who not only did not ask her for the conventional 'time of the action' but, we presume, must know the month of the year they are in now. (Is the narrator in the eighth month of pregnancy?) Having no chrono-metric function or chrono-logical link to what precedes, the line

connects spatially with other parts of the story but mainly with what began with a "Caesar salad" as *hors d'oeuvre*. The logic of the two parts which point to the two imperial figures is not in any linear ordering of narrative elements but in the evocative potency of their names, for both suggest power as they also herald the "Augustine" moment following all beginnings in the ripening process of a new fiction.

56 Beyond irritation at Rita, therefore, the only italics in the story show the significance of the "waiting" phase for the narrator, an embryonic period of gestation that continues its work in silence, and that reminds us of Valéry's "creation" of *attente*, the French word for "waiting" but also for "expecting" or "intimating," with which he equates the poetic or creative act itself: "La création 'poétique,' c'est la création de l'attente"'Poetic creation is the creation of the waiting [phase]' *Cahiers II* 1113).

57 Having once made "the rest of us" part of the story's creative process through the discrepant but all-inclusive "we" of the fat man, her underlined question resonates in its multiple connection to all the participants once again, including them in the same "waiting" process as the story comes to its end. The waitress herself would "like to know" if the child "will turn out like that, so fat." Rudy, as we know, is also waiting for his picture, the one of a monument whose spiritual resonance will reverse the process begun by a Dionysiac figure who could not govern his own appetites in "Fat." And "we," the other readers who know that "Fat" contains only a "terrifically fat" first course or somato-legomena of a fiction whose real body is "hardly there at all" yet, are also waiting at the end of "Fat" for the rest of Carver's fiction to come. "In that wise," not much "different from the rest of us" is Carver, who writes in *No Heroics, Please*: "My first book of stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* did not appear until 1976, thirteen years after the first story was written" (126).

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NOTES

1. I am indebted to Professor Claudine Verley for reading this paper at its various stages and giving me the benefit of her thorough criticism and insight. I also wish to thank Professor Harold Schweizer for the encouragement of his comments and advice at a later stage of my work.

2. Concluding from the above, Carver would have agreed with Paul Valéry who writes: "Le but de l'oeuvre est d'étonner l'ouvrier", 'The aim of a work *[oeuvre]* is to astonish its worker [*ouvrier*]' (*Cahiers II* 997).

3. Myers, a writer in "Put Yourself in My Shoes," whose crescendo of laughter in the story is matched by the growing anger in Morgan's vociferation, is such a character. As he relegates the telling of stories to Morgan, a professor, the writer can only laugh at the authorial pretensions of an academic who tells those stories in the nineteenth-century manner of a Tolstoy. (The above conflict between the two men and their functions is the object of a work currently in progress.)

4. The process of collecting material that needs to gestate before finding utterance in the writing act itself is given narrative body by Carver in the eponymic "Collectors," another self-conscious story also found in the first collection.

5. We may note at this point the significant insistence on "his [side], her [side]" in "Why Don't You Dance?" with which Carver opens his second collection of stories entitled *What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Love?*

6. In "Furious Seasons" we read: "The caption said they believed the soul was visible in the breath, that they were spitting and blowing into the palms of their hands, offering their souls to God" *(No Heroics* 29).

7. "Et le rire aussi est un réveil",'And laughter too is an awakening,' says Valéry in his *Cahiers* (I 25).

8. In Kirk Nesset's article the above is in the form of a question.

9. More in line with American snacks is the food in the story "The Idea," where a couple compensates for sexual inactivity through voyeurism and the following kinds of food: "I put bread and lunchmeat on the table and I opened a can of soup. I got out crackers and peanut butter, cold meat loaf, pickles, olives, potato chips. I put everything on the table. Then I thought of the apple pie... Vern came out... [and] said, 'What about a bowl of corn flakes with brown sugar?'"

10. It may explain why, after the narrator manages to draw a cathedral with his blind friend, he will ignore the wife, whose "juicy thigh" had once aroused him: "My wife opened her eyes and gazed at us. She sat up on the sofa, her robe hanging open. She said, 'What are you doing? Tell me, I want to know.' I didn't answer her."

11. It is hardly surprising also that *R*udy and *R*ita, the protagonists of the story's diegetic function, have been given names with the common first letter "r" for their rudimentary [w]*r*iting and *r*eading. Through their diminished narrative vision they represent the mimetic process alone, one linked to [a]*r*ithmetic rather than to the geometry of the new spatial connections that Carver's fiction demands of the new reader.

12. According to Paul Runyon, the fingers are "full of milk-white sperm" (12).

ABSTRACTS

Cette étude se propose de montrer que les écarts narratifs déchirant la surface mimétique de la fiction de Raymond Carver sont souvent les signes d'une auto-réflexion toujours présente dans son oeuvre. Dans cette optique, "Fat", qui ouvre le premier recueil de nouvelles intitulé Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, illustre que les besoins d'un client obèse auxquels s'efforce de répondre une serveuse (la narratrice) signalent les impératifs d'un corps narratif naissant. N'ayant pas encore trouvé son unité formelle et thématique, une telle textualité se présente en fragments ("parts"), parmi lesquels les plats successifs du repas analysés ici dans leur séquence et impact allégoriques. D'où l'importance accordée par la serveuse au hors-d'œuvre ("Caesar salad") qui menace d'éclipser celle du plat principal ("meat and potatoes"), indiquant ainsi que cette nouvelle introductive ne contient pas encore d'autre message que celui du désir d'articuler les prolégomènes d'une œuvre en gestation.

Une telle textualité, fracturée plutôt qu'uniforme et univoque, est en outre suggérée par l'emploi exclusif du pronom "we" par lequel l'homme se réfère à lui-même, signe d'une potentialité embryonnaire véhiculant également la pluralité des discours à venir, et que son corps contient. Finalement, ces fragments narratifs sollicitent le lecteur à leur donner une ou des unité(s) nouvelle(s) de nature moléculaire ; si les critiques de "Fat" ont souvent voulu y voir une unité d'ordre mimétique, celle-ci est plutôt à chercher, à nos yeux, dans la pléthore de possibilités combinatoires qui attendent leur scripteur.

AUTHORS

VASILIKI FACHARD

Vasiliki FACHARD, née en Grèce, a suivi toute sa scolarité aux Etats-Unis. Après un Ph.D sur la perception scientifique et poétique du temps dans les *Cahiers* de Paul Valéry, et une charge d'enseignement à SUNY (State University of New York at Albany) de 1970-1980, elle réside actuellement en Suisse où elle enseigne la langue et littératures anglophones. Elle a donné des cours sur le théâtre américain ainsi que sur Raymond Carver à l'Université Populaire de Lausanne.